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"You can discharge me if you want to," Mrs. Jenkins was saying, "but I'll tell you just the same that you are nothing more than an impostor in this house."

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LILLIAN CRAWFORD was not a bit surprised to hear her stepmother say that she did not approve of her visiting the Talbot home. In fact, she had expected it. And, moreover, she was ready for the severe scolding sure to come. She had quickly steeled herself against it. Her lips curled themselves into a half-smile, which vanished the next instant.

"You hadn't any business to go to Talbot's house," Mrs. Crawford spoke with growing anger, and rose from her chair. "You know that I have warned you repeatedly to stay away.

"What will the people think about your frequent visits to the house of—of a murderer. Have you no shame, no pride? I can't tell you how bitterly disappointed I am in you, a Crawford."

Lillian's face paled.

"Victor Talbot is no murderer," she replied hotly. "He is innocent, and he'll never be convicted of having killed Roger Hawkins."

The older woman drew herself up haughtily.

"I am not going to argue that question with you," she shot back, her wrath threatening to get beyond her control. "The trial will show whether or not Talbot did the shooting.

"But what I want to say to you is this: for the last time I forbid you to go over to Talbot's. And I mean every word I say. Either you'll mind me, or I'll adopt more stringent measures in the matter."

"But, mother," the girl began, "I cannot——"

"So long as I am your legal guardian you'll do as I tell you," Mrs. Crawford interrupted. "Not another word do I want to hear from you. Go to bed at once."

Lillian had long since learned that it was not a good thing to prolong an argument with her stepmother. With tears in her eyes, and her head bowed, she

passed into the house. But something within her rebelled. She had been treated like a child long enough.

She was about to turn back when Mrs. Crawford, having quietly followed her, took a hold of her arm.

"If you know what is good for you, go to bed!" the latter hissed. "I won't tolerate any more of your back-talk. Do you want me to slap you?"

More to escape this indignity than for any other reason, the young girl walked quickly up the stairs. Her mind was made up, however, to do all in her power to help prove that her lover was innocent.

She must collect all the evidence she possibly could before the trial of Victor Talbot began.

So while Lillian prepared for bed with a heavy heart, her stepmother was again seated on the veranda, making plans for the immediate future.

"I simply must have some reliable woman to watch that girl," she muttered to herself. "I can't understand why no one applies for the position I advertised. I do hope I have better luck to-morrow."

It was a strange fact that not a single person had come to claim the position of companion in spite of the fact that a liberal salary was offered and that no conditions were imposed.

Even the fact that she asked applicants to call at the suite of rooms at a first class hotel like "The Blackstone," specially engaged for the occasion, failed to bring them.

The following day as she arrived at the hotel, she found one applicant waiting for her.

And this lone applicant was none other than Marie Desmond, the former governess at Oak Manor.

Mrs. Crawford at once interviewed her. She was afraid to ask any personal questions because she feared that the applicant would decline to accept the position

And because of this quite a few interesting facts were not brought to light.

Marie longed for activity. She was well informed as to existing conditions in the Crawford home. The newspapers had been full of Hawkins murder and the consequent arrest of Victor Talbot.

Also Lillian's love affair with the latter was given considerable publicity.

What information Marie lacked, Mrs. Crawford gave freely.

"You see," she went on, "I am so busy with social affairs that I have not sufficient time to devote to my stepdaughter. The moment I noticed that she cared for Mr. Talbot, I tried to stop it. But it was without avail.

"She is determined to marry him. I would not have objected if the man was a fit match for her. But he isn't. He is just an ordinary farmer without any high ideals or social standing."

While Mrs. Crawford paused for breath, Marie's mind was busy.

Marie knew Victor Talbot far better than this woman suspected. For it was at the Talbot home she nursed Phil Gordon after having been shot by Harold Wayne.

She regarded Victor Talbot as a splendid match for any girl, and she began to wonder why Mrs. Crawford so strenuously objected to him.

So while her prospective mistress chatted on, she listened quietly. Not a single word of comment did she utter.

At first she felt strongly inclined to refuse the position which she was urged to accept because she feared that her whereabouts might become known at Oak Manor.

Finally, however, there awoke in her a feeling of

pity for the young girl who was to be committed to her care.

She accepted in a few well chosen words.

"Ah, I am very glad, Miss Desmond," the other exclaimed. "I feel that I can trust you."

"Indeed, you can," Marie smiled a little wistfully.

"It is not an easy task you are undertaking," Mrs. Crawford warned. "My stepdaughter will not take kindly to being managed by an outsider. She is very obstinate and not often amenable to good influences. There always was a streak of waywardness in her."

While Marie did not know as yet that this woman was deliberately lying to her, she had more than a vague suspicion.

Intuition told her that there was some ulterior motive behind it all.

She began to study Mrs. Crawford with constantly growing interest.

Her efforts in that direction soon gave her an insight to the woman's character.

Already she refused to believe that Lillian was wayward and given to fits of temper and melancholy. In fact all the glaring faults accredited to the young girl she discounted.

"You know," Mrs. Crawford went on, suddenly growing confidential, "my late husband knew Talbot intimately. Before he passed away he made me promise to keep Lillian away from the man who now is in prison accused of murder. I have tried to keep that promise. It is a sacred duty."

This amazing falsehood was uttered in a tone of grave concern. The lying woman even wiped an imaginary tear from her eyes.

"I hope you will do your best to help me discharge this sacred duty," she spoke again after a slight pause.

"One of your main tasks will be to keep away any communications between my stepdaughter and Talbot. I have already selected a place where Lillian shall remain in seclusion.

"And one more thing, Miss Desmond," she added. "You must be firm. Do not be misled by any story the girl might tell you. She is a mighty shrewd little actress as you will soon find out.

"Don't allow her melancholy to arouse an undue feeling of sympathy in you. Above all things, try to remember that you are taking my place in this case."

Marie had listened attentively.

Her knowledge of human nature was too well developed not to be able to place the proper construction upon anything that was said.

"I shall do all in my power to make Miss Crawford see the error of her ways," she said earnestly. "You may depend upon me to discharge every duty to the letter. How soon do you want me to come to your home?"

"At once, if you can," was the quick reply. "I have my car in the city and you can drive out with me. Don't bother about your things. You can have them sent later. I think I would like your company. If you wish you may run back home and bring such wearing apparel you require immediately."

"I would like to do that," the newly engaged companion for Lillian Crawford responded.

Both women rose and shook hands cordially.

"I suppose you'll be back in an hour, Miss Desmond?" Mrs. Crawford smiled.

"Yes," the other nodded, and left.

And promptly an hour later the closed limousine sped from the city with two women passengers. Mrs. Crawford took personal charge of Marie upon their arrival, and showed her to her room.

"Now, please make yourself thoroughly at home, Miss Desmond," she said. "I will go and inform my stepdaughter that you are here."

Mrs. Crawford found Lillian in her daintily furnished boudoir, busily engaged reading a newspaper.

The girl's eyes were red from recent weeping. She made no move except tossing the paper aside as her stepmother entered.

"You were crying again, eh?" the older woman scoffed, surveying the unhappy girl with a scornful glance. "What for, I'd like to know."

Lillian made no retort. She remained seated with her head bowed and her lips quivering anew.

"What you need is a change of scenery," Mrs. Crawford went on. "I have made arrangements for a nice long trip. I think being away from this part of the country will do you a lot of good."

The young girl shot the speaker a quick, searching look.

"Where are we going?" she inquired.

"Oh, I am not going with you," Mrs. Crawford replied quickly. "I am too busy for that. But I have engaged a splendid companion for you. She will accompany you wherever you travel."

Lillian's lips were pressed together in a bitter smile.

She knew what this meant. Her stepmother was anxious to get rid of her so that she might dominate the situation.

But she was determined not to leave the neighborhood until after Victor's trial.

When she told her stepmother that, the latter flew into a rage.

"I have had enough of your eternal objection!" Mrs. Crawford cried, her eyes flashing with anger. "Do

you think I'd allow you to upset the plans I made for you at a great expense? You are leaving to-morrow with your companion and that is all there is to it."

She walked over to the door and stood there for a moment, reflecting.

"You begin packing your things now," she ordered shrilly. "If you dare oppose me again, I'll send you to a reform school. I won't stand for a daughter of mine running after a man charged with murder."

Without waiting for an answer, Mrs. Crawford swept from the room and slammed the door behind her.

The wretched young girl realized that her stepmother's last words were no idle threat.

So long as she was under age, she was compelled to obey the woman whom the law called her legal guardian. She pressed both of her hands to her breast and stifled a sob.

Chapter 159

A HAPPY REUNION

PHILIP GORDON'S first day of searching for Marie did not bring the desired result. Instead of finding a clue which would lead him to the only woman he had ever loved, he stumbled across her fallen sister. The unexpected meeting between him and Julia Carey, once an actress of promise, had placed another worry on his shoulders.

Unless she left Chicago immediately as she had promised to do, there was always a possibility of her picking up someone with whom the Careys and the Gordons had been socially connected in days gone by.

And Phil had good reasons to dread such a possibility.

There were plenty of men and women among the circle of his acquaintances and friends who eagerly looked for bits of sensational gossip.

Their way of expressing themselves would be something like this:

"Oh, yes. Julia Carey and Gordon's first wife were sisters. You know why Marie left home and why her husband divorced her. No doubt one is as bad as the other. A case of tainted blood."

Sentiments of this nature would be uttered frequently. Phil imagined he could already hear them. He knew what those scandal mongers were capable of.

What they would say of Julia would be true to a certain extent. But in placing Marie in the same category was rank injustice.

Feeling nothing but the most bitter remorse for

having wronged her, he was determined that no filth should ever touch her name again. He was ready to go to any extreme to prevent it.

So the first thing he did as soon as he got home, was to get in telephonic touch with Dr. Van Buren and ask him not to breathe a word to anyone about their meeting with Julia Carey.

This was really not necessary, for the physician was not the kind of a man to peddle such news.

"Are you going out again, Phil?" he wanted to know as the latter finished with his request.

"No, I don't think so," Gordon answered. "I have about made up my mind to let the Burns Detective Agency handle the matter entirely. I hope they will be more successful than you and I were."

After a moment of silence Dr. Van Buren said:

"Do you think you got rid of Julia for good?"

"Please don't mention her name," Phil begged in a trembling voice. "Not even over the phone. She promised faithfully that she would leave the city at once and go back to Hollywood. I am expecting to hear from her there."

That ended the conversation. Phil hung up and went to bed. And to his surprise he found that he felt almost happy.

While in his own mind he was not absolutely convinced that the beautiful woman he had employed as a governess was his beloved first wife, he enjoyed going over all the incidents in connection with her.

He had been drawn toward her with an irresistible force.

For the second time he had fallen desperately in love with the woman whom he had good reasons to suspect of being his own wife.

And strange to say, he did not take Alice into con-

sideration. His marriage to her was something he could easily forget.

Even the consequences which must inevitably follow if he found Marie, did not worry him to any great extent.

Alice might rebel at being shoved aside. She would very likely contest being divorced, but what of that?

In case of need he could produce quite a number of witnesses who would testify that Alice had been extremely lax in her wifely duties.

With thoughts of this character constantly passing through his mind, Phil fell asleep.

The following morning he rose in better spirits than usual. As soon as he was dressed he went to the nursery. Annie was amusing the children by telling them stories while they were eating breakfast.

"Well, well!" he cried as Harry and Phyllis ran forward to meet him. "How are you?"

The little girl put her arms about her father's neck when he picked her up and she kissed him. The boy, a manly chap, disdained such evidences of affection, although he believed his daddy to be the best and biggest man in the wide world.

The expression in his somber eyes proclaimed that he had a grievance this morning.

"Dad," he said, looking up at his father, "why did Miss Desmond have to go away?"

Gordon could not hide his embarrassment.

"Don't you know that all people who work hard are entitled to a vacation?" he exclaimed, forcing a smile. "And Miss Desmond has been working very hard with you children.

"She has gone to visit some of her relatives," he fibbed without moving an eyelash. "You must not feel

unhappy about that. She is coming back."

"How soon, daddy?" Phyllis wanted to know.

"Oh, in a few weeks, dear," he said. "But we don't want to hurry Miss Desmond, do we? She must take a nice long rest. And won't we all be happy when she comes back."

There was real joy on Gordon's last words.

"Well, I hope Miss Desmond will come back soon," Harry remarked earnestly. "I love her like a mother."

"So do I," the girl chimed in.

The faithful Annie stood there with tears in her eyes. She was just as anxious as these children to have her beloved old mistress back.

Somehow she was afraid to look at Gordon for fear she might betray the secret she had promised to keep.

"Does—does Mrs. Gordon bother about the children?" he inquired as he was about to leave the room. "Does she, Annie?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, sir," she replied.

"I am glad of that," the master of the house retorted. "I would much rather have it so. I want you to take complete charge of the children until Marie—" he paused with a blush and corrected himself hastily, "until Miss Desmond returns."

Somewhat hurriedly he left the room and went downstairs to breakfast. He found Betty seated at the table, her features radiant.

"Bob is coming to-day," she cried. "Oh, Phil, I can't tell you how happy I am. He doesn't know that I am here. Dad wants to surprise him. He'll get here sometime this morning."

Gordon's heart was lifted. He could well understand his sister-in-law's joy. Cruel fate had separated

her from the man of her choice.

To see them reunited was something he had looked forward too. There was no need for him to speak. Betty did all the talking.

"Everybody in the house is glad, except Alice," she said suddenly with a touch of sadness in her voice. "When I told her this morning that Bob was coming, she actually frowned."

"You must not mind what Alice does," Phil rejoined with a sigh. "She has peculiar notions."

Betty Harding was about to emit another volume of chatter, when the sounds of an automobile approaching the house attracted her attention.

She ran to the window. She did not have to wait until the lone occupant brought the car to a stop and jumped out. Her heart told her who this visitor was.

"Oh, it's Bob!" she gasped, her cheeks paling with excitement. "I must run up and tell dad."

Old John Procter was sitting up in bed as Betty dashed into the room. There was no need of asking questions.

Her glorious eyes told the story. He kissed his favorite child tenderly as she threw herself in his arms.

"I want you to go into the next room and stay there until I send for you, Betty," he told her. "Bob doesn't know why I sent for him. I must prepare him for the surprise."

"Alright, daddy, dear," she agreed happily. "But, please, don't let me wait too long."

"I won't," he promised with a smile.

The young Mrs. Harding disappeared a moment later.

When Bob Harding was admitted into the room, it could easily be seen that he was laboring under the strain of forcibly subdued excitement.

Instead of uttering the usual words of greeting, he ran over to his father-in-law and extended a hand.

"You sent for me, dad," he said, his glance wandering swiftly about the room. "I hope you are not seriously ill."

The old gentleman smiled as he pressed Bob's hand.

"No, there is not much the matter with me," he declared, the smile lingering about his mouth. "I sent for you because I have some good news. Betty has been found and——"

"Betty?" Bob Harding stood transfixed. "Good God, don't kid me like that, dad. Did you say Betty was found? Where is she?"

"I must not tell you that, my boy," came back in a peculiar tone. "But I am quite sure you will see her this very day—yes, within the next hour. Now, don't lose your head," he added as his son-in-law turned white as a sheet. "Keep a hold on yourself."

"Is—is she here?" the young husband gasped.

Mr. Procter was spared an answer.

Unnoticed by both of the men, the door of the adjoining room opened and at the threshold there appeared the slender figure of a young woman.

All at once a half sobbing and half jubilant tone rang from the doorway:

"Bob—Bob—Bob!"

Was he dreaming, or was he really holding in his arms the wife whom he had given up all hope of seeing again?

"Bob—dear Bob! How happy I am," cried Betty on his shoulder, laughing and crying in one breath.

The shock of his joy proved too much for Harding. He could not say a word. His eyes were moist and he saw the tender, true face which he had missed for so

long, as if through a mist.

At last their storm of joy allayed and, noticing that their father was wearied, the reunited pair withdrew into the next room.

The reader can imagine all they had to tell each other. Bob did not grow tired of asking questions about all the experiences she had gone through.

Betty answered them all, but when he came to speak of the time during which she had been at the old home on Ashland Boulevard, until Alice had finally brought her here, her eyes fell and the words came haltingly from her lips.

Bob thought of the apparition which he had seen disappear into the tower and which he had set about to investigate but without discovering anything.

Something in Betty's story was not clear to him. She was hiding something, he was convinced, but he did not wish to trouble her now with more questions.

He was happy enough to have her restorted to him. Happiness such as this came but once in a lifetime, and he would not have it marred by the slightest anxiety.

Bob's own experiences, Betty had already learned through her father, but still she had a great deal to ask him.

They could have gone on in this way indefinitely, but an interruption came when Alice who had learned of Bob's arrival, came in to them.

Betty's features clouded at once on her sister's appearance. In the hour of coming to her father, Betty had discovered Alice's cruel deceit which had robbed her father, Bob and herself of so much happiness.

While they were almost dying in their misery, Alice had been wicked enough to keep her imprisoned. Only now, that her father was near death—so thought

Betty—had Alice's conscience awakened and caused her to bring her to Oak Manor.

Up to this time, Betty had had neither time nor opportunity to call her sister to account for her shameful actions.

That no one else should learn of her false dealing, Alice had forestalled by exacting her sister's promise of strict silence about the past.

Bob saw that Alice's presence troubled his wife. He saw something strained in her conduct toward her sister and concluded that the latter had not dealt well with her.

He hoped to find out later from Betty what had taken place between them.

Bob had almost forgotten about Phil, but at a gentle hint from Betty, he went to speak o him.

He found Phil in his room so bowed down in engrossing thought at the window, that he did not hear his brother-in-law enter.

Chapter 160

"WON'T YOU TRUST ME?"

MARIE DESMOND'S arrival at the Crawford home created somewhat of a stir among the servants. The females of the species apparently resented the presence of this beautiful and obviously refined young woman. Although Marie was quite aware of this, she did not show it.

She was somewhat puzzled by not being introduced to Lillian Crawford immediately upon her entry into the house. She had expected to meet the young girl at once.

Mrs. Crawford seemed to be kindness itself. She made every effort to win the newcomer's good will and esteem.

She assured Marie that the position would be permanent, with an occasional increase in salary. She chatted volubly about many things of interest to women.

"I do hope you will be able to break my stepdaughter of some of her bad habits, Miss Desmond," she said suddenly. "Lillian is a very peculiar girl in some respects. She goes from one extreme to the other."

"You may rest assured that I will do my best," answered Marie.

While this conversation was being carried on, one of Mrs. Crawford's confidential servants came into the room and whispered a few words to her mistress.

"Please pardon me for a moment," Mrs. Crawford said to Marie. "I am wanted at the phone."

She uttered this deliberate lie with a smile. No one wanted her at the phone at all. She had been sum-

moned to take quick action in a matter the servant was unable to cope with.

Lillian had just come downstairs with the intention of paying another visit to the Talbot home.

"Where are you going?" Mrs. Crawford demanded as she caught up with the girl at the door.

"I want to go over and see Mrs. Ruggles before I leave on my trip," Lillian replied, removing her stepmother's detaining hand from her arm. "I must see her on a matter of importance."

Mrs. Crawford's lips tightened as did a new grip on the girl's arm.

"You will not go to the Talbot home," she said in a low, menacing voice. "I forbid it. Now return to your room and stay there until I send for you. In an hour you will be leaving."

For a moment it seemed that Lillian would insist upon having her way. She ran through the hall and attempted to reach the outside by using the side exit. Again she was stopped by her stepmother. Anger flared up in both women.

Finally the girl ubmitted and went back upstairs to her room.

With an ugly grin on her face, Mrs. Crawford returned to the newly engaged companion in order to finish the conversation. There were a few orders she wanted to give to Miss Desmond.

A moment later the latter left the house and was driven away at a rapid pace. It had been agreed, for certain reasons, that she should be introduced to the young Miss Crwford away from home.

Alone in her boudoir, and in mournful brooding, Lillian spent the hour of waiting for her departure.

A vague alarm oppressed her heart. She feared Mrs. Crawford's unknown plans to which she was help-

lessly subjected. There was not a soul in the house in whom she could confide.

On her husband's death, Mrs. Crawford had discharged all the old servants and had taken new ones. If she could only write Mrs. Ruggles a few lines and say good-bye to her!

When he was free again, Talbot would not know where she was.

She rose and wrote her farewell to Mrs. Ruggles and enclosed a little note for her lover. Perhaps the faithful old woman would find an opportunity to hand it to him!

Her heart felt lighter when she had finished writing, and, when Mrs. Crawford, in an elegant traveling gown, came to her room, she was rather astonished to see the young girl apparently quiet and resigned.

"Are you ready?" she asked shortly.

Lillian nodded.

"Very well, then, we can go. The car is ready. I can only accompany you for a short distance and will then leave you with your new companion. I must come back here as soon as possible."

Lillian did not answer, but compressed her lips tightly. She knew her stepmother was acting a farce.

As her eyes once more roved about the cozy room in which, during her father's life-time, she had spent so many happy hours, a great heart-ache threatened to master her and the tears hung upon her lashes; but she repressed her emotions and set her teeth firmly.

Her stepmother must not have the satisfaction of seeing her grief.

With erect bearing, she preceded her stepmother to the waiting automobile. Her maid and one of the men followed with the baggage.

With pity and sympathy they regarded the pale

young girl whose troubles they well knew; but they did not dare, in the presence of Mrs. Crawford, to give expression to their feelings.

The steward hurried forward to receive instructions from Mrs. Crawford.

Lillian peered anxiously about. The chauffeur was busy with the baggage, her maid stood near, all alone.

"Susan," she whispered entreatingly, "I know you are fond of me, and will be true to me, will you do me a grea tfavor? When I am gone, will you take this letter to Mrs. Ruggles over at Talbot's place, please? But be careful. Here is a little remembrance."

Unnoticed, she slipped a paper bill into the hand of the girl who looked anxiously in Mrs. Crawford's direction, and then nodded affirmatively.

With a sigh of satisfaction, Lillian went back, having seen Susan hide the letter quickly.

Both exercised the greatest caution, they thought, but their short conversation had not escaped Mrs. Crawford.

"Lillian," said she, when she had finished with the steward, "will you go to my room again and see if I have locked my desk? I miss the key."

She was going on a fool's errand, for Mrs. Crawford had the key, as she well knew, in her pocket-book.

Barely had the young girl gotten inside the door, when Mrs. Crawford went quickly to Susan.

"What did Miss Lillian have to say to you?" she bullied the startled girl. "What did she give you? No excuses now! Give it to me, or you quit this very hour!"

Susan trembled in every limb, and thoroughly cowed, brought forth the letter.

"Miss Lillian asked me to deliver this," she stammered, "this is all she wanted."

"Give me the letter!" commanded Mrs. Crawford, "I will look after it myself. Miss Lillian need know nothing about this," she added significantly.

Susan helplessly gave up the letter, and as Lillian returned, she did not notice the anxious face of her maid who gazed at her with expressive dark eyes.

They were ready to go. Lillian took a long last look at her home which, perhaps, she would not see again for a very long time, and they were on their way.

The journey to the railroad station passed monotonously. Lillian looked dejectedly out of the windows while Mrs. Crawford leaned her head back in her corner, scheming incessantly.

"Well, I shall soon have to leave you," suddenly said Mrs. Crawford, sitting up. "Miss Desmond, your companion, will be awaiting you at the station. You and she will go to a quiet place which I have selected especially for you, so that you can recover your natural tone and health. You may not know it, but you look, and you are, run down."

"I am not ill, there is nothing the matter with me," rejoined Lillian. After a slight pause, she added: "I have been perfectly well at home, and do not understand why you suddenly wish to have me away."

Mrs. Crawford bit her lips. A venomous look darted from her eyes.

"Although I am not obliged to account to you for my actions," she sneered, "I may as well tell you that I deem it better for you to be away from home to protect you from your own recklessness.

"I want to call your attention to the fact that Miss Desmond now takes my place, and you are to allow yourself to be entirely guided by her. She will finish your still incomplete training and teach you how a girl of good family should carry herself."

To this Lillian gave no answer.

Although her nature rebelled against the iron rule of her stepmother, she saw clearly that she could not attain any benefit by a sharp retort.

Musingly she continued to look out of the window.

"Miss Desmond," Mrs. Crawford had called her new companion. The name seemed strangely familiar. Where had she heard it before? However, she had no time to give the matter further thought, for the machine had stopped and they had to get out.

Mrs. Crawford looked up and down the platform until she finally saw Miss Desmond's tall, slender figure at one of the entrances.

"There she is," she said, and hurried to Marie, who had also seen her.

"Miss Desmond, this is my daughter," she cried. "I hope she will not make your position too difficult. I am placing her in your charge from this moment, as I am compelled to return home at once."

The meeting between Lillian and Marie was very cool. At sight of Marie, the young girl seemed for a moment surprised, but then quietly withdrew her glance and looked to the ground.

After having spoken with Marie for a short time and expressed her wishes, Mrs. Crawford took her leave quickly and stepped towards the automobile which was to take her home.

With reluctance, Lillian gave her hand in farewell to her stepmother.

When the latter had disappeared, Lillian underwent a great struggle not to cry aloud from vexation and a longing for her home.

Her stepmother was going there, driving her—the orphan—into the cold world!

She felt inconsolably miserable and deserted. A

pall seemed suddenly thrown over the future and the orphaned heart shrank back from the lonely path where only spectres were visible.

True, at home she had felt equally miserable, but at least she was where Victor Talbot could find her on his release; now, she knew not what was in store for her!

It was the first time in her life that she was away from home without knowing when she would return again.

"Shall we go into the waiting room, Lillian?" asked a soft, sympathetic voice at her side which felt to her like a caress. "It will be half an hour before our train comes."

Mechanically, Lillian nodded and followed the slender woman who seemed to exercise a peculiar charm over her, against the influence of which Lillian, in her perplexity and woe, tried to fight.

She resolved to be cold and unapproachable toward this person who had been forced upon her as a representative of the woman she hated.

She was nothing more than a paid spy of her stepmother's, nothing more than a jailer. She would surely watch her closely like a Cerberus, and deprive her of all pleasures in life.

They took a seat at a table in the waiting room. Marie, with her fine perceptions and great experience, read every thought from the pale features of the poor girl who was struggling with the tears which would again and again rise to her eyes.

She felt it would be better to leave Lillian to her own inclinations and give her time to become accustomed to the change.

But the silence between them was becoming embarrassing and disagreeable. Marie had nothing but

deep sympathy for this obviously unhappy young girl.

"I—I hope you and I are going to be good friends, Lillian," she ventured.

A contemptuous sniff was the retort.

"You don't like me, do you?" Marie tried again.

"How can you expect me to like any one my stepmother hired for the purpose of watching me like a criminal," Lillian returned, her cheeks flushed with indignation and wrath.

"I am afraid you place the wrong construction upon the position which I hold as your companion." smiled the other congenially. "While I am obliged to put certain restrictions upon your movements, I have absolutely no desire to be your jailer."

Lillian Crawford deliberately turned her back upon the speaker, whose tender eyes suddenly became misty.

Marie realized that the girl could not have much faith in anything she might say to her, so she decided to discontinue further conversation until some more propitious moment.

Then a rumbling noise announced the arrival of the train. Both women rose simultaneously.

As it happened the chair car was unoccupied. Lillian selected a seat in the rear of the car and made it known that she wanted to be left alone during the trip.

It became very evident that she was making a brave attempt from breaking into tears. But the task proved too much for her. Suddenly she hid her face in her hands and began to sob.

For a long moment Marie watched her in sympathetic silence.

"Poor child," was her mental observation. "if I could only tell you how I feel toward you and what I would like to do. I know what it is to be unhappy and

homeless. I know what it means to be a wanderer on the face of the earth. I am leaving behind two children of my own flesh and blood, to whom I must forever remain a stranger."

Finally she rose and went over to Lillian. With utmost gentleness she placed an arm about the young girl's shoulder. For an instant their eyes met, and then their tears began to mingle in the first embrace.

"I want to love you if you will only let me," whispered Marie. "Although appearances are against me, I am your friend, Lillian. Won't you trust me?"

Whatever ill feeling still dwelled in the girl's breast was quickly dispelled. It suddenly occurred to her that this companion, although in her stepmother's pay, was a human being after all.

Chapter 161

STRAINED RELATIONS.

EVERY OCCURRENCE that has as a consequence a sudden change in a man's life is bound to bring about a reaction. Philip Gordon was experiencing a reaction now. Toward his father-in-law he showed a feeling of antipathy that closely bordered on personal dislike. He could not forget that old John Procter was indirectly responsible for Marie leaving his home.

Of course, Alice had made the request that the governess must be discharged before she consented to return to Oak Manor.

This did not hurt him so much because he knew that Alice was capable of almost anything.

Her request he would never have granted if the old gentleman had not insisted. But Phil had allowed his love and sympathy to dominate him. He had yielded because his father-in-law appeared to be at death's door.

And now Gordon found it hard to forgive himself. Once more the woman he honored and adored had slipped away from him.

In spite of the search which was being prosecuted with vigor, no trace of Marie could be found.

Coming downstairs for breakfast one morning, he heard sounds of a wordy battle coming from the kitchen.

The one voice he recognized as that of his wife, and the other belonged to Mrs. Jennings, the housekeeper. What the argument was about, he could not understand.

He was about to pass on into the dining room

when he paused again with a start.

"You can discharge me if you want to," Mrs. Jennings was saying in a raised voice, "but I'll tell you just the same that you are nothing more than an imposter in this house. The poor woman who has a right to be called the mistress of Oak Manor was forced to leave because of you."

With a bound he was at the kitchen door, jerked it open and strode in.

"What is the matter, Mrs. Jennings?" he inquired in a kindly tone, and without paying the least attention to Alice. "I heard you out in the hall. What are you so excited about?"

"Nothing," the old woman replied glumly. "I am discharged and I am ready to pack my trunk."

"But I don't want you to go," Phil said. "Now, let us talk this matter over. If it is a question of more money, you shall have it. If it is some difficulty you had with—with Mrs. Gordon, I'll do my best to adjust it."

Alice's face was black with anger as she whirled upon the speaker.

"I deny you the privilege to interfere when I am forced to discharge a servant," she cried vehemently.

"What has Mrs. Jennings done?" he asked quietly.

"I won't stand for any more of her impudence," Alice flashed back.

"What did she say?" Phil persisted.

"I'll tell you what I said," the old housekeeper broke in, and she again spoke the words to which he had listened while standing in the hall. "I repeat," she added, taking off her apron and tossing it on the floor, "that woman is nothing more than an ordinary——"

"Please, Mrs. Jennings," Gordon interrupted. "You must not forget that you are speaking about my—my wife."

"Your wife?" came back with a harsh laugh. "Some wife, and some mother she was. I haven't forgotten the night she went gallivanting around at a reception with that man from Chicago while her baby lay in convulsions. Much did she care whether the poor little mite lived or died."

Gordon winced. The old housekeeper was speaking a most painful truth.

He glanced at Alice to note the effect the words had. She was ghastly white and her tall figure trembled from head to foot.

"Must I stand for this?" she hissed, her hands clenching and unclenching with uncontrollable rage.

Phil made no answer. But he did something which was very significant.

As Mrs. Jennings strode toward the door with the evident intention of ending the scene by leaving, he placed a hand on her arm and held her back.

He owed this woman something for having opened his eyes to the fact that Marie Desmond was none other than Marie Gordon, his first and dearly beloved wife.

"You will stay here," he said masterfully.

The woman shot a triumphant glance at Alice.

"I'll stay on one condition, Mr. Gordon," she declared. "I won't take any more orders from her, "jerking a thumb disdainfully in the direction of the second Mrs. Gordon.

"From now on you will receive your orders from me," he told her. "Please be quiet now."

There was a time when Alice would never have acquiesced to a thing like this. But the time of throwing alternatives into Phil's teeth, and get away with it, was past.

She knew that now a threat to leave Oak Manor would have met with a smile of agreement from him.

She had not the least desire to relinquish the position she had regained after so much scheming.

Being called "Mrs. Philip Gordon," entailed certain advantages not found anywhere else. This, Alice knew from experience.

As she passed him on the way upstairs to her boudoir, she gave Phil a look that was deadly.

But this was only a prelude of their many disagreements to follow. That evening as dinner was announced, the chairs usually occupied by the two children had not been placed at the table. Alice and her sister Betty were already seated.

The moment Gordon noticed this, he raised the question.

"I have given orders that the children should eat their evening meal with Annie in the servants' dining room," Alice replied. "They always create such a disturbance."

Without another word Phil stepped to the door and rang the bell. In a voice that quivered with anger he ordered that the children be brought into the dining room at once.

His eyes flashed as they rested on his wife.

"Don't ever attempt anything like that again," he said hotly. "The children belong to me, and not to the servants."

Alice flung the knife she was holding on the table and left the dining room, carrying her head like an insulted queen.

But even insulted queens don't stoop to slamming the door behind them.

It was the first time that Betty witnessed a scene of this kind between her sister and Phil. There were tears in her gentle eyes as she made an almost childish attempt to smooth the matter over.

"I—I didn't know Alice had developed such a temper," she said.

"Didn't you?" Gordon's smile held mockery. "She can show the best developed temper I ever saw in a woman."

Betty gave him a swift glance and chose to be silent during the rest of the meal.

From that day on Phil saw little of his wife. She appeared only in the dining room when others beside her husband and the children were present.

She never missed an opportunity to show her contempt for the man she had promised to honor and love.

Most of his time Phil spent in the company of the children. Another change was imminent, for Bob Harding was making preparations to take his sweet young wife back to Chicago with him.

Old Mr. Procter objected strenuously to this.

"Please don't take my Betty away, Bob," he begged almost piteously.

"But I can't afford to drive way out here every night, and back again every morning, dad," Harding protested. "It is too expensive."

"You know what I have offered you," his father-in-law reminded him. "You don't have to work at those greasy automobiles for a living. I would not allow one of my daughters to work in a kitchen, and you are my son."

One of Bob Harding's fine characteristics was his spirit of independence.

His ambition was to have a home of his own, paid for with money earned by himself. Having married a rich man's daughter he always had deemed a sort of a reproach.

The argument finally terminated by Bob agreeing to make his home at the old Procter residence on Ash-

land Boulevard.

The arrangement suited the old gentleman very nicely, for he was anxious to get away from Oak Manor. His mission as a peacemaker between Alice nd Phil had proven a signal failure.

After the departure of the Hardings, accompanied by Mr. Procter, calm settled upon the house of the Gordons for a little while.

Phil and his wife studiously avoided one another. He received no visitors except Dr. Van Buren who drove out occasionally.

But trouble began to brew again. Quite unexpectedly Nora Evans arrived. There was a secret conference between her and Mrs. Gordon.

The outcome was that the Evans woman again resumed the position of Alice's confidential maid.

As soon as Phil learned this, he flew into a rage. He made a hurried trip to his wife's boudoir.

"I don't want that woman in the house!" he objected.

"Don't you?" Alice's laugh was impudent in the extreme. "Well, Nora Evans stays just the same. Even though you claim the exclusive right to give orders to the other servants, I can chose my own maid. And I'll keep her too, whether you agree to it or not."

"Alright," snorted Gordon, "but you better understand one thing right here and now. If that Evans woman ever dares go near my children, I'll throw her out bodily."

With this ultimatum he turned and left.

And now Alice bent every effort to regain her former position as a social leader. Without consulting her husband she invited and entertained whom she chose. This was embarrassing, for he had no use for her friends.

Continued in next number

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